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Recommended Citation

Haslett, Quinn, "07, Kerver's Colophon" (2018). *Kerver Book of Hours: Senior Capstone 2018*. 3.
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Thielman Kerver's Colophon

Quinn Haslett

Thielman Kerver was born in Koblenz, Germany but worked in Paris, France as a store owner and printer. Part of the city's early cohort of printers, Kerver's books quickly earned their spot in the middle to upper echelon of the market due to his varying techniques. Pushing for engravings over woodcuts for his illustrations, the result led to the higher quality Kerver was known for. The burgeoning tight-knit printing community in Paris sets the scene for Kerver and many of his fellow printer's stylistic choices, and the reasoning behind their printing choices.

First establishing shop at the "Sign of The Unicorn," Kerver's location was surrounded by other members of the printing community, who often fulfilled multiple different roles in the printing process. The shared use of engravers often led to similar images across printings. Developing marks usually to distinguish their work, these marks began to take shape as a calling card, an early trademark to separate the printer's work from others, in an era where prints shared similar aspects. The colophon, typically containing the printer's marks included in the back of a print, displayed the creation date and printer through their marks and identifying thematic elements, like Kerver's repeated use of unicorns.

In the case of Kerver, his distinct printer's mark contains a shield with his initials being flanked by two unicorns. The image of the unicorn was a popular for printers, because of its religious connotation and use in medieval heraldic imagery. His use of unicorns served many purposes, starting with the connection to his shop. The incorporation of images in the colophon is often tied to the shop where it is printed and specifically the sign hanging outside. In the case

of Kerver, being located at the Sign of the Unicorn provides the easy reference to his business and workplace. Coupled with this, the use of the unicorns in their positioning and how they are framed around the shield shows the strong influence heraldry still had in the time period.

Using the shield emblazoned with his initials, similar to that of a coat arms of arms, was not unique to Kerver, or to other printers at the time like Kerver's former partner, Simon Vostre. Harking back to early medieval times, the use of a coat of arms to signify a noble family house was quickly co-opted for early printed books. The role heraldry then played was that of ownership and displaying books as possessions, and therefore an extension of those who owned it.² Kerver's use of these heraldic elements is the product of this appropriation. Tying the unicorn to his family business and marking himself as the creator of the print, the addition of his mark created added value, displaying his brand.

Beyond Kerver's initials in the shield, the majority of the space contains a cross shaped symbol. This stylized four-shaped symbol is similar to that of one of Kerver's former partners, Johannes Phillippi. The cross-staffed mark used by both Phillippi, including the variation used by Kerver was the most commonly used symbol by printers at the time,³ and was copied routinely. Kerver's use alters it slightly, as it sits at an angle instead of the typical vertical positioning. While Kerver's use of the four symbol suggests that much of his mark is purely ornamental, the lineage of Kerver's mark suggests otherwise. The printer's mark can be described as: " ...is that it is a picture, design, or ornament found in a prominent position in a printed book, which

² Cruse, p. 48.

³ Willoughby, p. 205.

associates it with its printer or publisher.”⁴⁴ The four-mark for Kerver could then be described as ornamental as it tends to hold no significant connection to him and was common for printers to use at the time. The use of the unicorn is the opposite. After his death, and with his wife and son taking over the printing business, the use of the unicorn did not disappear from use by the Kerver family. Adapting the unicorn but not always using two of them, Thielman Kerver’s son Jacques continued the the mythical animal in his printings’ marks. This continued use further cements the association to the Kerver family beyond that of just thematic element, but as an ongoing tie to the family and their printing business.

⁴⁴ Wolkenhauer, p. 52.

Phillippi Mark



Kerver Mark



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